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24 April 1973

MEMORANDUM

Retrospective View of Communist Force
Levels in South Vietnam

Introduction

1. In the period ^{from} late 1967 ^{through} early 1973, CIA and MACV officially held different views on the strength and structure of Communist forces targeted against South Vietnam. These forces include personnel in regular combat, administrative services, and irregular (i.e., guerrillas, self-defense and assault youths) units as well as the VC infrastructure. Reasons for the different views between the two organizations are the result of differing methodological and conceptual approaches to estimating the size of Communist forces. As a result, our individual estimates of VC/NVA force levels have varied over the years with respect to the number of units carried in the order of battle (OB) and their strengths. The following discussion attempts to identify specific areas of disagreement by category of forces and indicate in the light of hindsight if subsequent evidence has substantiated the CIA or MACV estimates. No attempt is made to compare

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specific strength figures over time, except in the most general sense, since there are several estimates by each ^{organization} ~~originator~~ for any given date, due to the process of continually refining estimates as new information became available. In any event, specific order of battle comparisons are not the subject of this memorandum.

Regular Combat Forces

2. Differences in CIA and MACV estimates of Communist regular combat forces revolved basically around varying methodological approaches. MACV estimates generally have required "hard" intelligence data requiring multiple confirmation before units could be accepted into the order of battle. Thus, the MACV estimates, particularly its collateral order of battle, were subject to a considerable time lag and thus did not reflect real-time estimates. This was alleviated, but not entirely corrected in May 1969 when MACV first began publishing an all-source order of battle. CIA's approach to the problem, on the other hand, was more of an estimative nature and allowed for greater flexibility and more timely adjustments to actual changes in the Communist's force structure based on all-source intelligence. Consequently, ^{from 1969} ~~the CIA developed over the last several years~~ an add-on approach to the MACV order of battle in order to

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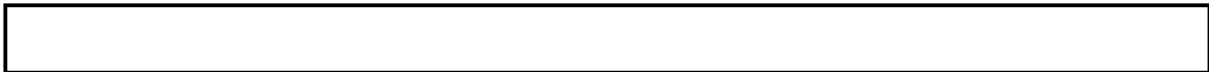
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compensate for those areas for which hard evidence was incomplete or unavailable. The CIA approach was essentially centered around five additions to the MACV order of battle.

These were:

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- New or previously unidentified units,



which did not yet meet MACV's criteria for acceptance. The magnitude of this add-on generally ranged from 5,000 to 10,000 combat troops.

- An average battalion strength adjustment based on collateral evidence to compensate for the differences between the apparently low estimates in the MACV holdings. This methodology yielded an ^{on the order of} additional 2,000 to ^{additional} 5,000 troops.
- Combat support units integral to divisions and regiments which were either omitted from or ostensibly understated in strength. This category generally added some 2,000 to 7,000 more personnel to the MACV ^{OP} particularly in the 1967-68 period.

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-- Compensation for the omission from the OB of small specialized units subordinate to province, district, and city echelons which were contained in captured documents but did not meet MACV's acceptance criteria. This addition was generally on the order of 5,000 to 10,000 personnel.

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~~54~~ The inclusion of those ground combat units located between the DMZ and Dong Hoi in North Vietnam, which were believed to targeted against South Vietnam. This number of North Vietnamese combat forces in this area have fluctuated between zero and as many as 25,000 troops during the ~~1967-73~~ ¹⁹⁶⁷⁻⁷³ period. *This add-on continues to be used by CIA.*

In retrospect, the CIA ^{*inclusions*} ~~estimates~~ for adding new or previously unidentified units into the OB -- which at the time did not meet MACV's acceptance criteria -- have proven *for* ^{*the*} in most part to be justified. ^{*the majority*} Most of these units were subsequently picked up in the MACV OB. During 1968, ^{*added*} *for* examples of this ~~included~~ the 308th Infantry Division, the 27th Infantry and 96th Artillery Regiments, as well as a number of units of battalion size. ^{*were accepted by MACV several months after sufficient evidence was available for inclusion into the CIA*} With the establishment of a MACV all-source OB in May 1969, the addition ^{*and previously unidentified*} of new units to the MACV OB became more timely and the size of this CIA add-on category was accordingly reduced. Although as late as 1972 CIA was still accepting the presence in South Vietnam of some North Vietnamese units more quickly than MACV -- e.g., the 270th Infantry Regiment --

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The
a large part of this current time-lag difference probably
was more the result ^{from} of MACV analysts having to clear
acceptance of the unit through channels ^{rather} than because of ^{differing}
~~differing MACV and CIA~~ analytical judgments.

Collateral sources also have tended to validate the
CIA position with regard to the addition of a higher
number of combat support units integral to divisions and
regiments. In early 1968, for example, evidence supported
^{in the CIA OB}
the inclusion of at least 6 combat support battalions
subordinate to the NVA 325C Division and 2 additional
support battalions of the VC 9th Division ~~to the MACV OB,~~

These units were subsequently accepted into the MACV OB.

Nonetheless ^{continued to be a}
~~Currently~~ there is still a significant difference between
MACV and CIA ^{estimates} strengths ^{of} ^{personnel assigned} for combat support to major Commu-
nist units in South Vietnam. ^{existent} This is particularly true

In Military Regions 3 and 4 where, for example, MACV
carried in its last published OB for January 1973 five
NVA infantry divisions with a combined strength of less
than 10,000 ^{maneuver and combat support} troops. CIA, on the other hand, carries
these same units at approximately 20,000 men. The total
difference in strength results from the fact that CIA
carries not only the maneuver but also the combat support
strengths of these divisions at about twice the size of as

→ CIA still believes in the validity of its previous judgment based on in-
depth analysis of captured enemy documents that about 40 percent
of the strength of an infantry regiment or division are
combat support personnel and the remainder ^{60 percent} are maneuver
troops.

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that listed in the MACV OB. The lower MACV figures resulted from their attriting the units more heavily in 1972 and allowing for less replacements than CIA.

Verification of the existence of the ^{province, district and city} ~~small special-~~ ^{level} ~~ized~~ units has not been as fully substantiated as the above add-ons. ^{consequently} We still believe, however, that they ^{are} ~~are~~ ^{still} ~~are~~ ^{more} ~~are~~ ^{understated} ~~are~~ ^{prob-} ~~are~~ ^{ably} ~~are~~ ^{continue to be understated} ~~are~~ ^{in both} ~~are~~ ^{the CIA and} ~~are~~ ^{MACV OB's.} This results from the fact that there ^{is} ~~is~~ ^{no} ~~is~~ ^{no} ^{for fear} ~~is~~ ^{the collateral} ~~is~~ ^{information on these units has dropped precipitously} ~~is~~ ^{identified in collateral sources less and less since} ~~is~~ ^{the} ~~is~~ ^{1968-69 period.}

^{the} ~~the~~ ^{ADD} ~~ADD The CIA add-on for average infantry battalion strength is difficult to verify in retrospect, ^{an} ~~an~~ ^{analysis} ~~analysis~~ of captured documents, particularly for the period up until 1969, clearly indicated that some upward adjustment to the MACV OB was ^{justified} ~~in order~~. The fundamental problem with the MACV methodology was ^{insufficient} ~~insufficient~~ allowance ^{was} ~~was~~ made for the Communists' capability to replenish unit strengths after suffering losses. After-battle loss counts were subtracted from the MACV strength listing of a particular unit, and, consequently, over long periods of time the units' strength on the average declined. During the period March 1968 through July 1968, for example, the average~~

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strength of infantry battalions as carried in the MACV OB of ~~these dates~~ decreased by 5 percent. Evidence from enemy documents, prisoners, and infiltration data indicated that average battalion ^{Strength} ~~did not fall as shown in the MACV data~~ but, in fact, increased. Thus, CIA compensated for this strengthening of enemy units by developing independent average battalion strength estimates (derived mainly from captured documents and prisoner reports) and adding the derived differences to MACV's listing of average battalion strengths. ^{During} ~~By~~ 1969, ^{however} ~~however~~, evidence ^{indicated} suggested that the Communists' average battalion strengths had actually diminished and the size of the CIA add-on was accordingly reduced. Moreover, by late 1970 information available on unit strengths began to seriously ^{deteriorate} fall off ^{and} ~~and it became more difficult~~ ^{very difficult to} ~~and less meaningful to~~ ^{derive} a separate add-on for this category.

In addition to these methodological difference in estimating the Communist regular combat threat, there is ^{was} ~~is~~ a conceptual one as well. CIA considers ^{those} ground combat units between the DMZ and Dong Hoi in its total estimate of VC/NVA forces targeted against South Vietnam. On the other hand, MACV did not disagree with the presence of units in the area, but nonetheless employed a more restrictive approach based on national boundaries for estimating the military threat to South Vietnam. ^{Because} ~~Many of the~~ units in this area subsequently deployed into South Vietnam or fired on ~~targets~~ ^{Allied targets} from 7 - north of the DMZ, there appears to be some justification for including units in this area in the OB estimates of Communist forces. SECRET//NO FOREIGN DISSEM

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Administrative Services

CIA and MACV have also used different methodological and conceptual approaches in estimating the Communist administrative services structure in South Vietnam. In contrast to the MACV "hard evidence" approach, CIA believed that ~~collateral sources~~ ^{unheeded} and the size of the Communist combat force ^{contained} required a support structure much higher than that indicated in the MACV OB. ^{of these factors,} As a result, CIA estimated the aggregate number of Communist administrative services personnel in the 1967-68 period on the basis of a ratio of such forces to VC/NVA combat personnel from the district to the COSVN level. This ratio was derived from analysis of captured enemy documents which gave such comparative strengths which were then generalized on a countrywide basis. By 1969, both CIA and MACV had refined their methodologies for estimating administrative services. MACV, in CIA's judgment, however, continued to significantly understate the number of such personnel subordinate to districts and provinces based on analysis of captured enemy documents. ^{However, during the 1967-68 period,} ~~Previously,~~ MACV had for a while excluded all district administrative services personnel from their order of battle, although by definition they should have been included. With the Allied cross-border

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operations in mid-1970, captured enemy documents revealed that the Communist administrative services structure was in fact understated by both organizations and the two estimates were adjusted upward to reflect this new information. The new data tended to confirm ^{original CIA} ~~earlier~~ estimates ~~by CIA~~ on the aggregate size of the administrative services structure which had been reduced in the process of ^{achieving coordinated} ~~reaching agreed~~ Intelligence Communist estimates in Washington. Although MACV's and CIA's current estimates of the absolute number Administrative Services personnel targeted against South Vietnam appear relatively close, the estimates on a region by region show greater variation. These differences result from the difficulty in determining ^{ing of} ~~where to account~~ for VC/NVA forces based in Cambodia and southern Laos, but whose areas of operations are adjacent to or straddle the border in support of Communist combat forces in South Vietnam. One ^{from} ~~example of this~~ is the fact that the 5,000 difference between the ¹⁹⁷² ~~MACV~~ and CIA estimates of administrative services personnel in Military Region 1 ^{was} is due almost entirely to the fact that MACV ^{did} ~~does not appear~~ ^{to include} ~~(to carry in its order of battle)~~ any General Directorate of Rear Services units which moved into northern

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me *South Vietnam area*
The presence of these units, indicated by COMINT and CIA files
not believe that MACV disagrees as to the presence of these units but
only as to what they should be counted in the OB for South Vietnam
than inclusion
South Vietnam from south Laos in mid-1972 to support
the Communist offensive. Moreover, in Military Region 3
MACV carries some 15,000 more administrative services
personnel than CIA. This results from MACV still
carrying the old rear service groups which deployed
into Cambodia in reaction to the cross-border operations
in 1970. Most of these groups, however, have since been
disbanded and reorganized into other groups within Cambo-
dia, as evidence both in COMINT and collateral sources[^]
where CIA currently carries them in its Cambodian OB.

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The degree of divergence between the CIA and the MACV estimates was especially large in the earlier years, but by late 1969 the gap had been considerably reduced. In mid-1967, for example, the MACV OB carried a total guerrilla

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strength of 65,000 compared to a range of 110,000-135,000 estimated by CIA. By September 1969, however, MACV listed 50,000 while CIA had lowered its estimate to 50,00-80,000. The most current figures carried by MACV for 1973 is 26,000; CIA estimates a range of 40,000-60,000. It should be noted that the difference here is not as great as it may appear. The MACV estimate reportedly excludes one category -- secret or covert guerrillas-- which CIA includes and estimates to be on the order of about 10,000.

Validation of both CIA and MACV past estimates of the Guerrillas is exceedingly difficult. The passage of time has not provided any new insights into the size and capabilities of the guerrillas as both captured document and US sources in the field have diminished in recent years. CIA believes, nonetheless, that the higher estimated ranges depicted actual guerrilla strength levels more realistically than the MACV OB, particularly in the earlier year, and that the current differences are of lesser significance than in the past -- at least in terms of military capabilities.

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In addition to the guerrillas, there are a number of other irregulars, namely self-defense forces and assault youths. Since 1967, lack of information on these forces has prevented any reliable independent estimate of their numbers. What little evidence is available, however, suggests that the number of Self Defense forces previously may have been on about a one-to-one basis with the guerrilla forces. The strength of Assault Youth groups is believed to never have been significantly large and probably numbered only about 10,000 to 20,000.

The existence and approximate size of these other irregulars was never an issue but MACV did not include them in their OB because it^x believed that they did not represent a real military threat. ^{to the RVN.} In the 1967-68 period, CIA held the opposite view because the self-defense forces were a major source of manpower for the guerrillas and the assault youths clearly were supporting Communist combat forces in South Vietnam. Because of improvements in pacification and the general run-down in the enemy's ^{guerrilla} other forces ^{since then} ^{these forces also} are no longer considered ^{by CIA} to be a significant ^{military} threat to the GVN. ~~at this time.~~

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~~SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM~~VC Infrastructure

In addition to the above Communists' military forces, there is a large number of enemy political and administrative personnel in South Vietnam, termed the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). The VCI are defined, according to MACV, as the political and administrative organization through which the Viet Cong control or seek to control the South Vietnamese people. It embodies the control structure of the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), which includes a command and control apparatus at the national level (the Central Office for South Vietnam) and the leadership and administration of a parallel front organization (National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam), both of which extend down to the hamlet level.

Estimates of the strength of the VCI are exceedingly difficult to make. *and verify, except in the most general terms,* One of the reasons is the varying number of definitions that can be used to describe what is commonly termed the VCI. The definition used by MACV* is quite vague and leaves open the question of exactly who is and who is not included. CIA's estimate on the other hand uses a broader definition on what constitutes the VCI. As a result, ~~the~~ CIA estimate, historically has been

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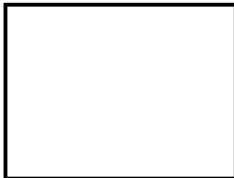
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higher than MACV's, particularly in the more recent period, CIA believes that captured ^{enemy} documents ^{clearly} indicate ~~that~~ there are ^a relatively large numbers of VC penetration agents targeted against the South Vietnamese government, military, and security organizations which have never been accounted for in ^{the MACV} estimates. ~~made by MACV.~~

Moreover, MACV has been attriting the strength of the VCI over time, but ^{is not believed to have made sufficient allowance for} ~~has not addressed~~ the significant number of replacement cadre who have ~~been~~ infiltrated ^{into} from North Vietnam, as well as those who have been recruited by the Viet Cong in the south. Because of this, CIA's estimate of the VCI currently is approximately twice as great as that of MACV's.

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